

OWYHEE CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 21,875 acres

The Owyhee Canyon WSA (NV-010-106), located about 90 miles northwest of Elko, Nevada, comprises 21,875 acres of BLM land and a 280-acre private inholding. Primitive dirt roads and a natural gas pipeline bound most of the WSA. The remainder adjoins private property. The South Fork Owyhee River WSA (ID-16-53/NV-010-103A) is just north of this WSA.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

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| 13,525 | acres recommended for wilderness |
| 8,350 | acres recommended for nonwilderness |

The 13,525 acres recommended for wilderness would protect 14 miles of spectacularly scenic canyon and 11,925 acres of surrounding plateau. The area appears natural, has outstanding opportunities for solitude and for primitive and unconfined recreation, and offers significant special features. The area is manageable to protect wilderness values over the long term. The 13,525 acres recommended for wilderness are part of a proposed 385,080-acre Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness that would include about 270 miles of desert canyon, 164 miles of whitewater boating opportunities, and 292,640 acres of plateau.

The 8,350 acres recommended for other uses include canyons and plateaus within the southern third of the WSA. Private property and its access route separate this area from the recommended for wilderness portion. A road is needed to the South Fork Owyhee River to provide access for whitewater boating. The existing access route to private property is the most reasonable location. The WSA's southern part has been identified through BLM's planning process as a possible utility corridor. Releasing the 8,350 acres for nonwilderness uses would allow for future consideration of these activities.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The western two-thirds of the Owyhee Canyon WSA consists of a gently rolling sagebrush, bitterbrush, and bunchgrass plateau. The eastern third is a basin cut by 21 miles of 100 to 300 foot deep canyons, including 18 miles of the South Fork Owyhee River. The narrow, meandering canyon walls that are not vertical are covered with sagebrush and bunchgrasses, while the riparian areas are narrow bands of lush grasses, rushes, and sedges. Wildlife includes mule deer, pronghorn antelope, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, river otter, beaver, raptors, waterfowl, chukar and other birds, and redband trout. California bighorn sheep may move into the area from the adjoining South Fork Owyhee River WSA. The WSA is predominantly natural. Man's imprints are limited to one stock pond and 4 miles of vehicle ways.

B. Solitude: The WSA's outstanding opportunities for solitude are attributed to the isolated seclusion of canyonlands and the vastness of the desert plateaus. The meandering character of the canyons and river bed provides excellent topographic screening between visitor groups traveling close together. The depth of the canyon, combined with limited viewing distances, creates a tremendous sense of seclusion from the rest of the world.

From high points on the plateau, thousands of square miles of open space, stretching from the Steens Mountains in Oregon to Juniper Mountain in Idaho to the Bull Run Mountains in Nevada, are visible. These vast, open spaces instill a sense of complete separation from civilization.

Military aircraft sometimes disrupt the solitude. A Military Operations Area and two Military Training Routes, used for low-level, high-speed exercises, cover the WSA. The military is also expanding its operations in the area to include supersonic flights. Aircraft fly as low as 100 feet above the ground. Disruption of the silence, which contributes to the feeling of solitude, is still infrequent. At times, aircraft can be seen or heard all day. Other times, one can travel for days and not see or hear a military jet.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The scenic natural features and landform diversity attract people interested in hunting, backpacking, river running, and the associated activities of sight-seeing, photography, wildlife viewing, botanical studies, and fishing. River running opportunities on the South Fork Owyhee River are exceptional.

The miles of canyons, their diverse and eroded rock landscapes, and their steep slopes create a sense of isolation, enhancing the primitive recreation experience. Visitors traveling in or near the canyon are constantly aware of the forces of nature.

The challenge and excitement of whitewater rapids add significantly to the boating experience. Hiking the rugged canyons and plateau without the aid of established trails provides an arduous challenge that heightens the primitive recreation experience.

Talus slopes encourage visitors to travel between the river and the plateau. Recreational use of the plateau concentrates near the canyon rims, which often offer less arduous hiking conditions than those in the canyon and provide spectacular canyon vistas. Hiking on the plateau provides an opportunity to experience vast, open spaces.

D. Special Features: The WSA is rich in special features, including scenic, wildlife and cultural values. The special features contribute significantly to the overall quality of wilderness characteristics.

The canyons are of high scenic quality. The combination of moving water, colorful sheer cliffs, grass-covered talus slopes, and blue sky creates a dramatic stark beauty that totally envelopes the visitor. Sheer walls of dark brown to black rock dominate the scenery. Brilliant green, yellow, and orange microflora tint the fractured, blocky rock monoliths. Near the base of the cliffs, water sometimes seeps from fractures to nourish small, lush, clinging, deep green plant communities. The sheer rock walls rise above steep slopes covered with mosaics of blackish rock rubble and subdued green and yellow vegetation.

Sensitive wildlife species include bobcat, river otter, and redband trout. The recent reintroduction of California bighorn sheep into the adjoining South Fork Owyhee River could result in bighorns moving into the Owyhee Canyon WSA.

The WSA contains both historic and prehistoric archaeological sites.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is manageable in the long term. There are no conflicting resource uses. The WSA is over 27 miles from a paved highway. Vehicle access to the WSA boundaries is mostly along minimally constructed and maintained dirt roads. Much of the plateau is relatively flat, but areas close to the canyon are strewn with rock rubble and are impassible to vehicles.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The area has low potential for all metallic minerals and energy resources. There are no mining claims or oil and gas leases. Sand and gravel deposits are present. Volcanic rocks, potentially usable as dimension stone or decorative rock, are widespread, but larger deposits are available in more accessible areas.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

The BLM received 117 comments on the draft Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness EIS, 48 supported all WSAs or portions of all WSAs in the Owyhee Canyonlands complex as wilderness, 46 opposed any wilderness in the WSA complex, and 23 had no position. Those in favor of wilderness for the Owyhee Canyon WSA supported designating the entire WSA as wilderness for long-term protection of wildlife, vegetation, and other natural resources. Opposition to any of the WSAs becoming wilderness was based upon a desire for improved livestock management opportunities, the need for continued use of the area for motorized recreation, the need to have further opportunities to explore and possibly develop mineral and energy resources, and the need to potentially develop utility corridors.

Government agencies took the following positions: the Fish and Wildlife Service supported wilderness designation; the Bonneville Power Administration did not object to wilderness designation provided there was adequate consideration of utility

corridors; the U.S. Air Force supported wilderness if no significant restrictions were placed on military overflights; the Bureau of Reclamation had no objection to wilderness; the Governor of Nevada, the Nevada State Office of Community Services, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, and the Nevada Division of State Parks supported wilderness designation; the Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology and the Nevada Department of Minerals could not endorse wilderness until more geological data was available; and the Idaho Air National Guard opposed wilderness, as did the local government of Elko County.

Following the conclusion of the public comment period for the draft Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness EIS, but before the completion of the final EIS, the BLM received 78 comments. One opposed any wilderness designation in the WSA complex, one took no position, and 76 supported wilderness designation. Of the wilderness advocates, 61 supported designating the entire Owyhee Canyon WSA as wilderness. Most of the wilderness support was in response to a "flyer" sent out by the Committee for Idaho's High Desert and to a Sierra Club "alert."